

The Lenten Meditations 2024

Episode 1: The Will

By Tara Ludwig



An angel comforting Jesus before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane (1873)
by Carl Bloch. Hangs in The Museum of National History in Hillerød, Denmark.

A fundamental precept of the creed of our Christian faith is the belief that Jesus Christ suffered for our sake. And Lent is the time when we offer our disciplined attention, with particular clarity and purpose, to this suffering, and what was accomplished by it. And yet, though suffering is so central to our theology, it seems to me that sometimes we don't quite know exactly what we mean when we talk about it. We recognize from our own experience of being human what pain

feels like—it hurts—stubbing our toe hurts, so does getting a tattoo or losing a pet or being lonely; but we get a sense that we mean something distinct and precise when we say, in the words of Isaiah, that Jesus was “a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering”. What was it about what Jesus suffered, and the unique way he suffered it, that was so profound it transformed the entire world? And how is it possible that we, his humble disciples, can follow in his example when our own hour of suffering has come?

In this year’s Lenten Meditations, we will spend time side by side with Jesus as he walks through his Passion and strive to notice what he reveals to us about his relationship with suffering. Through this act of solidarity, we hope to ponder more deeply both the love of our friend Jesus as it was expressed through his suffering, and these enigmatic words of the Apostle Paul: “For unto you it is given on the behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake” (Philippians 1:29).

We will start our pilgrimage with Jesus at what we might call, if we were inclined to be dramatic, “the point of no return”; that is, in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus pauses to pray before he is arrested. It was here in the garden that Jesus faced the inconceivable choice of straying from the will of His Father, or remaining faithful unto crucifixion and death. Jesus’ agonized prayer at this pivotal moment uncovers something essential for us about the nature of his suffering, and we will listen in here in the Gospel of Matthew:

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is

delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” (Matthew 26:36-46).

It is a criticism I have often heard of Christianity that we love to be martyrs; that we denounce joy and glorify suffering as the more righteous way of life. And even among Christians themselves, there can exist the misapprehension that because we are to suffer for Christ’s sake, we are meant to actively seek *out* suffering, to desire suffering as something valuable in itself. But this is a misinterpretation of our mission; as we see here in the garden, even Jesus preferred—and *strongly* preferred—*not* to suffer. He asks God three times to spare him from the cup of suffering, and he meant it.

Suffering for its own sake is not a holy pursuit. What was holy in Jesus’ example was his capacity to relegate his own desires and preferences, his own will, for the sake of God’s will, no matter the cost. Scottish minister and evangelist Oswald Chambers once wrote, “No healthy Christian ever chooses suffering; he chooses God’s will, as Jesus did, whether it means suffering or not.”

This is an essential distinction that we must make as we discern Jesus’ relationship to suffering. He does not teach us to choose suffering; he teaches us to choose God. So, when we are commanded to “suffer for Christ’s sake” it does not mean that to be good Christians we should run out and rustle ourselves up some suffering; it means that, if and when God wills that the pathway of our life should bring us to a place of suffering, we should courageously enter that place, instead of turning away.

So, my invitation to you, as I send you off into the wilds of this first week of Lent, is to reflect on your life and wonder about those times when you have been in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying that the cup of suffering may pass from you. Have there been times when you declined to activate your life according to God’s will because you were afraid of how much it would hurt? Also remember those experiences when you have accepted suffering willingly for the sake of Christ. What happened next that you didn’t expect?

I’ll close now with a passage from the poem “For Suffering” by John O’Donahue:

*May you know serenity
When you are called
To enter the house of suffering.*

May a window of light always surprise you.

*May you be granted the wisdom
To avoid false resistance.
When suffering knocks on the door of your life,
May you glimpse its eventual gifts.*

May you be able to receive the fruits of suffering.

*May memory bless and protect you
With the hard-earned light of past travail
To remind you that you have survived before
And though the darkness now is deep,
You will soon see the approaching light.*

Thank you for listening to the Lenten Meditations. May the time you spend side by side with the suffering Christ this Lent bring you ever closer to his beautiful heart. Amen.